

DANCE STAR

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Contra Afloat

A Different Kind of Riverdance

by David Millstone

The following article appeared in the CDSS News, September/October 2003 issue, published by the Country Dance and Song Society. The article has been condensed for space considerations.

You're kidding! We're going to dance on that?

The expressions on the dancers' faces spoke volumes. They were on shore and we were approaching them from the water, our little pontoon party boat towing a tiny raft. Rain was in the forecast and the sky was gray. This was not an auspicious beginning to our floating dance party.

It all started as a simple, albeit slightly crazy, idea.

Dancers in the Northwest have organized an occasional dance on a Puget Sound ferry. Boston contra dancers chartered a cruise vessel for an evening of dancing in the harbor. Then Andy Stewart told me about Fiddles on the Tobique, a large flotilla of fiddlers on the Tobique River in New Brunswick.

Andy, a fiddler in our local contra band, Northern Spy, told me that FOTT was started by canoe builder Bill Miller and in its first year boasted one fiddler.

The Tobique runs a fast course from the tiny town of Nictau, down seven or eight miles to Riley Brook. This year, there were well over 700 vessels, Andy explained. Saturday has the main event on the river. Throughout the weekend there are barbecues, church and firehouse breakfasts, and jams all a very down-home, community based affair.

That wasn't all. That first year, Andy reported, we were perched in the bows of two twenty-six foot voyageur canoes across which had been bolted a dance platform to accommodate four couples and the caller.

I ordered a video of the event; crinolines

flashing, there was a set of square dancers floating down the river. Surely we could do that. Our local dance community straddles both the New Hampshire and Vermont sides of the Connecticut River. We also have the Big Splash, an annual river celebration in early June that includes contra dancing.

And so, in mid-February, out went the first of more than a hundred

email messages. I contacted the Big Splash's main organizer, Bonna Wieler, and outlined a very vague idea: We'd push off from someplace upriver and would paddle/drift down to Wilder to the Big Splash site. Within a few weeks, another member of Northern Spy, Alan Graham, volunteered to take charge of raft construction. Alan was familiar with differences between the two rivers.

Alan made rough calculations: Nine two by fours (360 lbs), five plywood panels (300 pounds), eight dancers (175 pounds each, totaling 1,360 pounds).

Total boatload: approximately 2,020 pounds. This would make a twelve-foot by twelve-foot dance floor. Everything would be premeasured and assembled before the event and then disassembled for shipping to the starting site. Reassemble the floor on shore and carry it to the lashed canoes in the water. Maybe ten people to carry a floor weighing 660 pounds.

Four seventeen-foot Grumman aluminum canoes. Each canoe should be safely able to handle eight hundred pounds, i.e., four canoes times

(Continued on Page 3)



P.O. Box 21904, Santa Barbara, CA 93121

Profiles



Gary Shapiro

Interviewed by Keith Connes

Q: Gary, when did you become a contra dancer?

Shapiro: In 1982. I was working on a California initiative campaign right here in Santa Barbara, and the local group that was organizing it told me that they were having a barn dance as a fund-raiser. Not being totally alien to dance, having a mother who was into folk dancing, I decided to check it out and it was really more or less what we now call a contra dance.

Q: Where was this?

Shapiro: It was at Oak Park. I liked it and it didn't seem like clumsy me would have a big problem with it, and I've been dancing off and on ever since. I didn't really become addicted until 1990, when I went to my first Harvest Moon.

Q: And when did you start calling?

Shapiro: That was in 1993. My brother decided to move from L.A. to Hawaii and he thought I might want to move there, too, and I thought maybe I would. I noticed, though that they didn't have contra dancing on the island he was moving to, so I said, "Well, I'll find some musicians and I'll be the caller." So I started looking into how to be a caller and I went to workshops at dance camps, and Erik Hoffman helped me out. By September of '93 I called my first dance in San Luis Obispo. As time went on I decided I wasn't going to move to Hawaii after all, but by this time the wheels were set in motion for me to become a caller. I think I had a secret desire – unknown to myself – to do that. I had been a disc jockey, in an exploratory way, previously in my life, so there may be a relationship.

Q: When did you start getting interested in English country dancing?

Shapiro: Oh, I've been exposed to it over the years, because years ago the Santa Barbara Country Dance sponsored them at the Rec Center, and I wasn't that taken with it at the time. In my early days as a dancer there were several people who would go up every year to a dance camp that the Bay Area Country Dance Society puts on, informally called Monte Toyon. Those dances are both contra and English combined, so I was exposed to it there as well. It's not like I woke up one day and said, "Wow – this is really great!" It was a gradual process, and I think it had to do with being exposed to different teachers and bands, but finally it grew to a point where now I go to English Week every year up in Mendocino.

Q: Talk about the differences between English country dance and contra dance.

Shapiro: For many of the dances, you line up the same – it's a longways dance – you take hands four, and so people think they're going to get the same kind of payoff that they would get from a contra dance. Some of the payoff is the same, but you often don't get the same sort of continuous motion, with aerobic swinging and all that stuff. For a lot of people it's the music that's just heavenly and has a lot of variety.

Q: And each dance has music written especially for it.

Shapiro: Yes, or chosen for it. There's generally a one-to-one relationship between dance and music, although sometimes there's more than one dance for the same music.

It just takes me places! Contra takes me places, too – but different places. I was at an English dance recently, here in town, and I was just shaking my head – I was so struck by something, and I was asking Tony Friend, who's one of our English dancers, "What is this – what is it?" because I was so high from it. He said, "It's beauty," and I said, "You're right, you're right!"

Q: Are most English dancers also contra dancers?

Shapiro: Most of them are.

Q: And you don't conduct an introductory workshop at an English dance.

Shapiro: No, but if we have anybody new we'll start with relatively simple stuff. If they're contra dancers a lot of the things they already know will apply, and there's a couple of new things they can learn pretty quick.

Q: Getting back to contra dancing, have there been any changes that you've noticed over the years at the Rec Center?

Shapiro: I vaguely recall that when I started dancing, there were a lot more unequal dances, so I think the repertoire has become more modern – the newer dances that have been written over the past 30 years. We do fewer squares at our contra dances. I take some of the blame for that. Erik left, Carl Magagnosc and Jonathan Southard haven't been calling much and those are the people who call squares mostly.

Q: Do you have an interest in calling them?

Shapiro: Yes. One reason I haven't is, nobody's demanding that I do. The people who enjoy squares aren't asking me to try it.

Q: Well, isn't it up to you as a caller to determine your program?

Shapiro: Yeah, it is. I'd like to try and it's just a matter of biting the bullet.

Q: I imagine that a lot of people don't realize how much preparation a caller does before a dance. What are your goals when you're putting together a program?

Shapiro: Variety is one goal, so the dances don't seem all the same. For example, I wouldn't want to call two dances in a row that have a ladies chain over and back, or a man's allemande left once-and-a-half to a swing. Towards the beginning of an evening I try to make sure that there's more neighbor interaction, so people get a chance to dance with those they haven't asked to dance. And I try to keep the dances relatively simple at the start, and again towards the end of the evening I want to keep them not too challenging, as people tend to become more brain-dead.

Q: What do you get out of being a caller?

Shapiro: You mean when I could be dancing?

Q: That's right.

Shapiro: I get a vicarious thrill out of seeing people dance, and there's a certain reward when people are having a good time and I'm facilitating that.

Q: Thanks, Gary.

You can visit Gary's website at www.garydance.com.

(Correction: In the profile of Erik Hoffman that appeared in the previous issue, we misspelled the name of Deirdre Lynds.)

Contra Afloat

(Continued from Page 1)

eight hundred equals 3,200 pounds.

By mid-March, we announced our idea to the wider world and within a few days, we had our first volunteers with canoes. The ensuing months brought new concerns: Money for materials? Construction volunteers? Who will shuttle dancers and musicians? How long will it take us to make our way downstream? Do we paddle or pull a raft? Rain contingency plans? Cell phones?

Pontoon party boats would provide a much-appreciated canopy as rain cover for musicians and for dancers waiting their turn; these boats were also stable, but they had no open space for dancing. Soon came a blur of rafts proposed and rafts rejected.

A week before the event, we were offered three rafts by a local college fraternity. Joined, they would form a platform twelve foot by eighteen foot, a veritable palace of a dance floor. Perhaps we could squeeze two squares into that space, so we notified twenty dancers who had submitted their names in the lottery; dancers would rotate on and off the raft from an accompanying party boat. A day later, after the dancers had been notified, the college itself intervened and nixed the plan, due to concerns about liability.

Alan Graham located an eight by twelve foot raft to rent, and that's what we launched despite our dubious dancers. We were accompanied by a small fleet of other vessels, kayaks mostly, although we were joined mid-stream by another party boat of kindred spirits

who sang in rich harmonies as we changed dancers and who joined in the music and dancing.

Half a mile downstream from our launch site, the rain started, first as a drizzle and then more seriously. The dancers took it all in good spirit. They had more serious concerns: their footing. As one dancer commented, who quickly opted for the stability of a pontoon boat, "I loved the idea, but the reality made me a bit...queasy."

Scott Jacobs-Rebhun wrote, "When we were waiting for the raft to arrive, Betsy mentioned that it was only eight by twelve foot and Laura said that wasn't so small, that she had spent her entire freshman year in college in a seven by ten foot room and she thought it was plenty of space. There was a little verbal jousting about this until the raft arrived and Laura exclaimed, 'We're dancing on that tiny thing?!' We had a good laugh. The railings on the raft were of primarily psychological help as they weren't sturdy enough to actually keep someone from going into the drink."

The dancers were great sports, and most of us had great fun that day. Our first dance as we pulled away from shore was, appropriately enough, Lady of the Lake. I had to call Ted's Triplet #3, a simple dance that fit the occasion with its dip and dive figure. And several dances later, we opted for Waves of Tory, with another dip and dive, this time for five couples. At one point, head couples cast off and arch at the bottom. This had all ten dancers moving toward the back of the raft, which immediately took on water, so we quickly regrouped and revised the choreography.

Dancer Mary Stowe called the day a peak life experience, combining "my love of the water and my love of contra dancing in one glorious event." Paddling out to the laughing dancers on the bouncing raft, performing the poussez, the happy musicians, filled my heart with realizing we are doing a good thing. For my part, the sheer zaniness of the idea and the sense of community it engendered made this one of the most enjoyable dance events I've ever participated in.

Contra Community

An email list and message board has been created for the SoCal Contra community. Participants are invited to parties and potlucks, as well as contra and other types of dances. The group arranges rides, carpools, and camp activities, as well as exchanging information on jobs, housing, tickets, and other resources.

You are invited to list yourself in the Contra Community Directory. For further information, visit their Website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Lacontradancers>, or email LAcontradancers-owner@yahoogroups.com

Gimme a (Shorter) Break!

In response to some complaints that the dance breaks have tended to last too long, the SBCDS Board has announced that the breaks will henceforth be limited to 20 minutes, and during that time only one type of dance (such as folk, swing, etc.) will take place.

Goodbye from Sammy

With much happiness I have sold my business and home in Solvang. With mixed emotions I am moving to San Diego to be near my daughter and her family. With much sadness I am having to leave this dance community. Will plan on returning from time to time to dance or attend a weekend of dance. I know this sounds like a formal note, but just know that my heart is bent around each of you with loving thoughts and memories.

With tears cascading down my cheeks I say goodbye for now and will have a smile on my face again when returning to dance once more in Santa Barbara.

—Sammy Ellis

Santa Barbara Contra and English Country Dances are co-sponsored by SBCDS and

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA
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Enriching People's Lives

SBCDS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation

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Our special thanks to all the many volunteers who give their time and efforts to make the dances fun and contribute to the content of this publication.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the articles, news, and letters do not necessarily reflect the views of SBCDS.

Make Your Voice Heard!

Do you have ideas about making our dances better? Or any other dance-related thoughts, feelings, or experiences that you'd like to share with others through the pages of the Dance Star? Well, don't be shy – this is your newsletter, and your contributions are most welcome!

The best way to become a writing (Dance) Star is to email your priceless words to dancestar@sbcds.org. If you don't have email capability, snail-mail to Keith Connes, 283 Carlo Dr., Goleta, CA 93117. If you do not want your comments published, please say so; otherwise, we will assume that you have submitted your material for publication. Incidentally, we also welcome dance-related photos.

We reserve the right to edit all submissions. Deadline for the next issue is May 1.

DANCE SCHEDULE – Spring 2004

English Country Dances Westside Community Center 423 W. Victoria, Santa Barbara (Where Victoria dead-ends at Hwy 101)

Every Tuesday during March, April, and May 7:30 to 9:30

Live music with \$5.00 admission on the following dates:

Mar 9 Gary Shapiro/Thruppence

May 4 Alice Williams/Thruppence

All other dances will have recorded music and \$3.00 admission

Exceptions: Free dance March 16 at the Karpeles Library,
21 West Anapamu, Santa Barbara, and dance Sunday, April 18,
2:30 to 5:30 at the Carrillo Ballroom (see listing at right)

SLO Veteran's Hall 801 Grand Ave., San Luis Obispo (East of Hwy 101, Cal Poly exit)

Contra Dances are normally on the second Saturday of the month

The March 5 dance will run 8:00 to 11:00 (7:30 Workshop)

Starting in April, regular dances will run 7:30 to 10:30 (7:00 Workshop)

Admission: \$7.00

Mar 5 **(Friday!)** Keith Connes/Growling Old Geezers

April 10 Gary Shapiro/Fiddle Tunas

May 8 **Special FUNdraiser!** Calling by Gary Shapiro and
Warren Blier • Music by the Growling Old Geezers and Paddy
O'Furniture • Bake Sale and Silent Auction during the break

This special dance will run 7:30 to 11:30 (no workshop)

Admission: \$10.00

Ojai Art Center 113 S. Montgomery, Ojai (South of East Ojai Avenue) 7:30 to 10:30 (7:00 workshop)

March 20 Ginger Alberti/Michael Mendelson, Nancy MacMillan,
and Friend

Potluck dinner at 5:30

Free Dance to celebrate David Magney's 50th birthday

Dances appearing in this Calendar are sponsored by the
following organizations, listed by location:

Carrillo Recreation Center and Oak Park:

Santa Barbara Country Dance Society 805-969-1511

www.sbcds.org

Ojai Art Center:

Ojai Country Dances 805-933-0660

www.geocities.com/ojaicontradances

San Luis Obispo Veteran's Hall:

Central Coast Dance Society 805-541-0201

www.cccd.org

Carrillo Ballroom

100 E. Carrillo St., Santa Barbara
(Hwy 101, Carrillo St. exit, go north to Anacapa St.)

Contra Dances Every Sunday

7:00 to 10:00 (6:30 Workshop)

Admission: \$7.00, except as noted

- Mar 7 Caller's Jubilee/Michael Gutin & Friends
Blossoming callers contact Donna Karpeles:
donnabayet@aol.com or 805-682-1877
- Mar 14 Donna Karpeles/Southern Exposure
- Mar 21 Jane Ewing/Chopped Liver
- Mar 28 Gary Shapiro/Kristina & Her Right Hand Stars
- April 4 Jeff Spero/Growling Old Geezers
Note: Daylight Savings Time starts today!
Don't be late - set your clocks one hour ahead!
- April 11 Lynn Ackerson/Porch Dogs
- April 18 2:30-5:30 English Country Dance
James Hutson/Thruppence
5:30-6:30 Spring Potluck
Turkey provided - \$1.00 (Chopped Liver later)
7:00-10:00 Contra Dance
Gary Shapiro/Chopped Liver
Note: Dances are \$7.00 each
- April 25 Barbara Stewart/Bog an Lochan
- May 2 Donna Karpeles/Michael's Mixed Nuts
- May 9 Erik Hoffman/Standard Deviation
- May 16 Keith Connes/Growling Old Geezers
- May 23 Gary Shapiro/Porch Dogs

Spring Floor Weekend!

May 29-30

- May 29 2:00 to 5:00 Contra & English Country Dance
with James Hutson
5:00 to 7:00 Dinner Break
7:00 to 10:30 Contra Dance with Chuck Galt
Workshop: Hambo I with Erik Hoffman
10:30 to 12:00 Singing & Jamming at Rusty's Pizza
Cost: \$15.00 – After 7:00: \$9.00
- May 30 1:00 to 6:00 Contra dance – two callers & two bands
6:00 to 7:30 Potluck dinner
7:30 to 1 AM Contra dance – two callers & two bands
Workshops: Hambo II with Erik Hoffman, plus music jam,
singing, and one TBA
Cost: \$25.00 – After 7:30: \$15.00 – After 10:00: \$10.00